

Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian VI. Peleliu, Agony Island

by Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC(Ret)



Marine assault troops head toward the beach at Peleliu, 15 September 1944.

The 1st Marine Division spent 1941 and 1942 in the field, including 4 memorable months on Guadalcanal. It received compensation in the paradise of southern Australia during most of 1943, then returned to reality in the hell of Cape Gloucester as the year ended. Four unpleasant months later, the division was ordered to Pavuvu to refit. There, midst swamp and jungle, it had built a camp and was just settling in when, in June, it was alerted for the invasion of Peleliu.

Gen MacArthur had initially planned to reenter the Philippines by way of Mindanao, following seizure of the Palaus, 530 miles to the east, to eliminate their threat to his flank. However, when an extensive sweep by the Third Fleet revealed the enemy was unexpectedly weak, it was decided to strike directly at Leyte on 20 October, while executing the Palaus operation as planned. This entailed the landing of the 1st Marine Division on Peleliu on 15 September, followed 2 days later by the seizure of neighboring Angaur Island by the Army's 81st Infantry Division.

Intelligence on the 10,000-man Japanese garrison defending Peleliu was confirmed in documents captured on Saipan. However, little was known of the island oth-

er than it was 6 miles long, less than 2 miles wide, and surrounded by a reef. Not until landing did the Marines discover Peleliu's fragmented terrain, the product of a submerged reef thrust upward by volcanic action and now hidden under scrub jungle. The Japanese had ably exploited this tormented landscape, with its caves in the low-lying Umurbrogol Mountain, to create defenses of unsurpassed difficulty.

Prior to Peleliu the 1st Marine Division had used its 100 amtracs mainly as logistics vehicles. Now, it needed twice that number, plus some 70 armored amphibians, for its assault landing over Peleliu's reef. The 1st Amtrac Battalion had less than half its amtracs still serviceable. Only the 8th Amtrac Battalion at Camp Pendleton, reporting 10 percent readiness, was uncommitted. This compelled use of 1st Amtrac Battalion personnel as nuclei for the new 6th Amtrac and 3d Armored Amphibian Battalions. Working an impossible schedule, these units were organized, equipped, and "trained" in the time normally required to prepare arriving amtracs for combat. Most aggravating, the 3d Battalion found that its armored amphibians, all re-

See Amphibians On Parade, p. 108.



Marines on the Peleliu beach return Japanese fire from behind the shelter of an LVT(A) nicknamed "The Bloody Trail."

ceived in August, included the 37mm gun and 75mm howitzer models, both unfamiliar to their crews. Notwithstanding such problems, the armored amphibians sailed on 4 September accompanied by 221 cargo amtracs of the 1st and 6th Amtrac Battalions and a detachment of the 8th Amtrac Battalion. Among these, four were fitted with Navy flamethrowers; six others



Marines clear mines from path of a flame thrower LVT(4), one of three such vehicles in the platoon commanded by Ens Melvin B. Thayer.

were designated to guide tanks across the reef.

The deceptive tranquillity with which D-day began ended at 0530 when naval guns opened fire to herald the drama of the amphibious assault. The orchestrated scenario unfolded in familiar fashion until the lead wave crossed the line of departure. Thereafter, Japanese fire of increasing intensity fell on the boat lanes and reef, hitting 26 amtracs. Despite this deluge of fire, the first wave reached shore at 0832, and five battalions of infantry quickly followed. Progress thereafter was agonizingly slow and costly. Twenty-seven armored amphibians were hit while helping establish a shallow beachhead. Fortunately, their agony was relatively brief. Within the hour most of the division's 30 tanks had been guided over the reef and, though virtually all were hit during this transit, none was put out of action.

The division commander, who had announced the operation would take 4 days, was reluctant to accept the pace of events ashore or the eventual need for Army help. However, 6 days after landing the 1st Marines had suffered 56 percent casualties and was no longer a fighting force. It was relieved by a regiment of the 81st Division. The 5th and 7th Marines fought on, but by 15 October they too were exhausted and ready to have the Army finish the job. Finally, on 27 November, the "4-day operation" ended after 73 days of incessant combat and 10,000 casualties, 6,400 of them Marines. Included among them was Ensign Melvin B. "Flamethrower" Thayer, who had been adopted by the Marines and was killed on one of the support missions he unfailingly accepted for his flamethrowing amtrac detachment. Vehicle losses in the amtrac units were also unusually heavy. The difficult terrain, prolonged operations, enemy action, and exceptional demands for transportation had left only a handful serviceable when the division was relieved. Return to Pavuvu was poor reward for the agony of Peleliu.

USMC